Chapter 7

Rome and Its Empire

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

The stability that typified certain aspects of Chinese and Indian cultures was not present in the Mediterranean. The center of Mediterranean civilization shifted from Greece and its Hellenistic successor states to Rome. Rome developed during the fifth century B.C.E. in the Italian peninsula relatively independent of Greek civilization. After consolidating its hold on Italy, Rome prepared to expand not only into the western Mediterranean but also into the areas of Hellenistic civilization. This new Roman empire lasted for four centuries before entering a prolonged period of decline. It demonstrated a greater degree of centralization and bureaucratic organization than Greek civilization had been able to attain. The empire also provided an arena for the spread of Christianity and the interaction of numerous diverse cultures.

II. The Development of Rome’s Republic

A. Introduction

Rome’s earliest constitution balanced aristocratic authority with some public participation. On the basis of centralized administration, Rome created an early empire. The creation of an empire upset the social and political underpinnings of the republic by the second century B.C.E.

B. Etruscan Beginnings and the Early Republic

The people who became the Romans migrated to Italy around 2000 B.C.E. The region settled by the Romans fell under the rule of the Etruscans, who provided kings and an organized military force. By 510 B.C.E., the Roman aristocracy rebelled and founded an independent republic. The Romans also adapted the Greek alphabet to form a Latin alphabet, which was later used throughout western Europe. Aristocrats controlled the Senate and most of the magistracies, but public participation was incorporated in the early republic. Rights of plebeians were protected by law codes, and the lesser citizens could elect tribunes as political representatives. Two consuls, elected for a single year, were the chief magistrates of the republic. The republican economy was dominated by great landowners among the aristocracy, but free farmers were critical to maintaining the citizen armies. Law codes and popular assemblies provided a more explicit check on the aristocratic monopoly of public office than in the Greek city-states. The Romans also emphasized patron/client relationships between aristocratic families and poorer plebeians.
C. The Expansion of Rome

Unlike the Greek city-states, the Roman republic embarked almost immediately on imperial expansion. Utilizing its citizen armies, the republic gained control of the entire Italian peninsula. Conquered regions were incorporated into the republic or allowed to remain as independent allies. Rome’s greatest rival in the western part of the Mediterranean was the former Phoenician colony of Carthage in northern Africa. Between 264 B.C.E. and 146 B.C.E., Rome defeated Carthage in the three Punic Wars. Rome’s victory created an empire that extended from Italy to the Iberian peninsula and into northern Africa. The collapse of the Hellenistic successor states of Alexander’s empire drew the Romans into the eastern Mediterranean. Greece, Macedonia, the Asian littoral, and Egypt were drawn into Rome’s orbit.

D. The Results of Expansion

Treatment of conquered territories outside of Italy was often brutal. The creation of the republican empire altered the fundamental Roman economy. Aristocrats began to monopolize the land when small farmers could no longer compete with grain imported from conquered territories. Former farmers entered the ranks of the unemployed in the growing cities. Slavery as a result of military conquests and a wealthy merchant class created new elements within Roman society.

E. The Crisis of the Republic

The demise of the class of free farmers unbalanced Roman society and the republican constitution. The result was class conflict between the growing ranks of the poor and the Roman aristocracy. Some political leaders attempted to aggrandize their careers on the basis of this conflict. Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, two tribunes, attempted to introduce land reform and other social legislation in favor of the poor between 133 B.C.E. and 123 B.C.E. Both were killed by aristocratic mandate. After 107 B.C.E., the Roman consul Marius began to use paid volunteers to staff his armies in place of conscripted Roman citizens. The creation of a permanent military force dedicated to its commander threatened the position of the Senate. A second commander, Sulla, drove out Marius and his political allies. A succession of military commanders dominated Roman politics thereafter. A civil war between two of them, Pompey and Julius Caesar, brought the republic to an end. After Caesar took over the government in 49 B.C.E., he introduced various reforms. The result was to destroy the political monopoly of the Roman aristocracy. Traditionalist senators plotted against Caesar and had him assassinated in 44 B.C.E. Caesar’s death precipitated a civil war from which Caesar’s adopted son, Octavian, emerged the victor. While maintaining the external appearance of the republic, Octavian created an imperial state. For his success, he was granted the name Augustus.

III. Roman Culture

A. Introduction

The political rise and fall of the Roman republic occurred in the context of a cultural amalgamation of Greece and Rome.
B. The Range of Roman Art

After the second century B.C.E., Greek culture increasingly invaded Roman lifestyles. Cultural amalgamation was aided by similar pantheons of gods, although Roman religion was always closely involved with rituals celebrating the authority of the state. Romans picked up the Greek epic tradition, and poets and biographers were also active. Roman sculpture was largely a derivative of Greek styles. The Romans accepted Greek architectural traditions but added engineering improvements that permitted construction on a more massive scale. There was little advance over Greek science. Hellenistic schools of philosophy, including Stoicism, gained converts among the Romans. Monumental architecture was the symbol of Roman authority. Great buildings extended throughout the Roman Empire.

C. Major Themes in Roman Literature

While poetry was prominent in the later republic, the early empire saw the rise in popularity of history and biography. Many poets and authors praised the new imperial house. Poets such as Horace and Virgil were open supporters of the emperor. Poets, such as Ovid, who failed to write suitable works, were subject to exile. Later Roman intellectual life was less creative and tended to emphasize the collection and conservation of earlier works.

IV. The Institutions of Empire

A. Introduction

After the fall of the republic, Augustus created a more powerful military and a new administration to hold together the Roman Empire.

B. Imperial Rule

Although the Roman Empire was based on a concept of universal law enforced by the military, considerable autonomy was granted to local governments. Rome lacked the coordinated bureaucratic system typical of Chinese imperial government. Roman garrisons were posted throughout the empire, and generals often served as governors, which enabled some of them to develop their own power bases.

C. Augustus and His Successors

In addition to establishing the rule of Roman law and expanding citizenship, Augustus also attempted to maintain the facade of republican institutions. In fact, most of the power of governing passed to the emperor. Augustus wanted a return to republican family values and enacted reforms to restore the authority of household heads, strengthen traditional religion, and encourage household formation. He also relied heavily on the military to maintain control of the provinces. The basic form of the empire was not changed for nearly two centuries. Because no principle of succession was ever established to regulate the passage of power from one emperor to another, succession was often determined by military intervention and civil war.

D. Government and Expansion

The primary role of the state, other than maintaining order, was providing adequate food supplies and maintaining public works, all of which was dependent on a stable tax income. In
general, the empire practiced religious toleration so long as all citizens participated in the cults of the state. Jews and Christians fell afoul of this requirement. Throughout the first century C.E., the empire continued to expand territorially. The military expense of defending the lengthy borders of the empire eventually brought a halt to further conquest. The limits of expansion were reached by 180 C.E.

E. Roman Law

Roman law provided a common system for the entire empire. It focused primarily on property rights and family stability. Only citizens had access to full protection of the law. Useful law, regional tolerance, and some access to citizenship promoted loyalty and helped maintain peace in the empire for centuries.

V. The Evolution of Rome’s Economic and Social Structure

A. Introduction

In some ways, the Roman economy resembled that of Greece, with an initial social structure composed of aristocrats and free farmers made more complicated as a result of urban and commercial expansion. The commercial group, including some foreigners, developed at the end of the republic, when merchants gained a voice in the Senate. The imperial expansion of the republic also created a large, permanently underemployed class of urban poor. Roman family structure was strongly patriarchal, although the oppression of women was less severe than in either Greece or China. Women could appear in public, and some gained an education.

B. Slavery in Rome

At the end of the republican period, slavery increased as the numbers of small, free farmers decreased. Even more than Greece, the Roman economy depended on slave labor. In order to maintain control over huge slave populations, to conquer new regions and keep the supply of new slaves high, and to provide a means of employment for displaced farmers, the military grew. As in Greece, dependence on slave labor led to little technological development in means of production. Roman technological advance was limited to urban engineering, with only modest advances in other areas.

C. Rome’s Economic Structure

Roman economy was not uniform throughout the empire. In northern parts of the empire, it proved almost impossible to establish estate agriculture. Local populations often remained rural. In northern Africa, the exploitation of peasants was more thorough in order to ensure an adequate supply of grain for export. In Greece, there was a more commercial atmosphere. Roman society was split between aristocratic landowners, urban dwellers, and rural residents.

VI. The Origins of Christianity

A. Introduction

Christianity emerged during the first years of the Roman Empire under Augustus. Originally an offshoot of Judaism, early Christianity had little to do with Roman culture.
B. Life and Death of Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth, who taught that he was the Son of God, began Christianity. Although Jesus’ message was widely received among the poor of Palestine, Jewish leaders were suspicious of his motives and convinced the Roman governor to execute him around 30 C.E. as a political radical. His followers believed that he was resurrected from death as the long-awaited Messiah. Disciples spread the news of this message throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Messianic claims aroused resistance among some Jewish communities.

C. Christianity Gains Converts and Religious Structure

In the centuries after Jesus’ execution, many outside of Judaism converted to the new religion. Perhaps as many as 10 percent of the Roman population were Christian by the fourth century C.E. Christianity spread most rapidly among the poor and disadvantaged classes of the empire. Christianity also won converts from among those seeking a more emotionally satisfying form of religion. Roman stability and communications aided in the spread of the religion. The early political form of Christianity was drawn from the imperial constitution. In Christianity, bishops were governors of local communities and supervised activities from cities in which they resided. Bishops in the most powerful cities gained greater authority. The apostle Paul, who brought Christian beliefs to a wider public, was a critical figure in the dissemination of the new religion.

D. Relations with the Roman Empire

Gradually Christian theologians began to define religious beliefs in terms of Greco-Roman philosophy. Christianity became the most creative intellectual area of later imperial culture. In this sense, Christianity was an important conservator of earlier intellectual traditions. Refusal of Christian communities to participate in state rituals caused some early emperors to persecute individuals and groups. Persecution was only episodic, and eventually the state was able to allot to the Church a legitimate, if subordinate, place in the world.

VII. The Decline of Rome

A. Introduction

When the empire ceased to expand around 180 C.E., a period of crisis set in. The end of conquest limited new supplies of labor and economic growth at a time when military requirement continued to increase. The Italian economy continued to suffer, as exports from abroad cut into agricultural profits. Estates began to practice subsistence rather than commercial production. Devastating epidemics also killed off much of the population

B. The Classical Mediterranean Heritage

Some aspects of Roman civilization were enduring. Greco-Roman political and philosophical traditions became a foundation for later western civilization. But not all aspects of this legacy survived, and classical Mediterranean legacy has been more selective than that of classical China or India.
VIII. Global Connections: Rome and the World

Early in its development Rome was aware of other powers in the Mediterranean, seeing Carthage as a threat and Greece as a source of culture and knowledge. Trade brought Rome in contact with a wide range of cultures, but the empire focused on internal development. While tolerant of other cultures, they felt they had little to learn from cultures beyond the imperial boundaries.

**TIMELINE**

*Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.*

- beginning of Punic Wars
- beginning of the Roman republic
- beginning of the Roman Empire’s decline
- beginning of reign of Augustus
- death of Jesus of Nazareth
- assassination of Julius Caesar

510 B.C.E.
264 B.C.E.
44 B.C.E.
27 B.C.E.
30 C.E.
180 C.E.

**TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS**

*The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.*

- Etruscans
- consuls
- legions
- Hannibal
- Marius
- Julius Caesar
- Horace
- Trajan
- Senate
- clientage
- Carthage
- republic
- Sulla
- Pompey
- Livy
- Jesus of Nazareth
- plebeians
- Paul
- Punic Wars
- tribunes
- Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus
- Virgil
- Ovid
- bishops
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

Rome
Danube River
Judaea
Alps

Carthage
Byzantium
Rhine River
Sahara Desert

How does Rome’s position help to explain the Mediterranean base of its empire? What geographical features helped to establish the limits of the empire? How does the extent of the Roman Empire help to explain the Western expansion of Christianity?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. Compare and contrast Greek civilization to Roman civilization.
2. Describe the republican constitution of Rome.
3. Describe the expansion of the Roman republic throughout the Mediterranean.
4. How did the territorial expansion of the republic affect the society and politics of Rome?
5. Compare and contrast Greek and Roman culture.
6. Describe the constitution of the Roman Empire.
7. Compare and contrast Greek and Roman social organization.
8. Why did Christianity spread within the Roman Empire?
9. What was the legacy of the Roman Empire to succeeding western civilizations?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. Compare and contrast the political and social organization of Rome, Gupta India, and Han China.
2. To what extent was Rome simply a continuation of Greek civilization? To what extent did Rome innovate in Mediterranean civilization?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Rome paralleled Greece in all of the following ways EXCEPT
   a. social and economic structure.
   b. the geographical concentration of their cultures.
   c. city-state government.
   d. their pantheon of gods and goddesses.

2. Who were the Etruscans?
   a. pastoral nomads from the Asiatic steppes who disrupted Roman culture around 5000 B.C.E.
   b. a group residing in northern Italy who ruled the Romans through kings until 510 B.C.E.
   c. Germanic invaders from north of the Rhine who conquered Rome around 750 B.C.E.
   d. Phoenician colonists who settled in northern Africa

3. Which of the following offices could be found within the Roman republic?
   a. kings
   b. ephors
   c. Areopagus
   d. tribunes

4. How did the creation of a republican empire affect Rome’s society and economy?
   a. All classes in Roman society enjoyed prosperity as a result of territorial expansion.
   b. The agricultural economy flourished in Italy as small landowners were able to increase their output.
   c. Slavery diminished as opportunities for free laborers abounded.
   d. The territorial expansion tended to enrich the aristocrats and increase their monopoly over landholding at the expense of the small farming class.

5. Which of the following political figures was responsible for the final overthrow of the republic?
   a. Tiberius Gracchus
   b. Marius
   c. Julius Caesar
   d. Cicero

6. What was the most distinctive innovation of the Roman Empire?
   a. the willingness to abandon military force
   b. the continued use of two chief executives and a balanced constitution
   c. the use of law to produce cohesion within the empire
   d. the suppression of all local governments
7. Within the Roman Empire, local governments were
   a. replaced by military garrisons directly responsive to the central government.
   b. replaced by professional bureaucrats formally trained at imperial universities.
   c. handed over to the relatives of the imperial family who ruled as vassals of the empire.
   d. granted considerable autonomy.

8. Trajan was the emperor responsible for
   a. the extension of the empire to its greatest territorial dimensions.
   b. embracing Christianity as the official state religion.
   c. the abolition of slavery within the empire.
   d. the construction of the eastern capital at Constantinople.

9. Which of the following statements most accurately describes the Roman imperial attitude toward religion?
   a. The empire required all citizens to follow the state rituals and banned all other forms of religion.
   b. The empire quickly moved away from the traditional religious ceremonies and adopted the mystery rituals of the cult of Isis as the state religion.
   c. From 30 C.E. to 324 C.E., the official imperial policy was toleration of all religions regardless of their teachings.
   d. The empire tolerated most religions whose members were willing to grant formal acceptance of the traditional state religion.

10. From the first century C.E., the Roman imperial government
    a. occasionally persecuted Christians, but only on an episodic basis.
    b. persecuted Christians on a constant and efficient basis.
    c. embraced Christianity as the official religion of the state.
    d. accepted Christianity without persecution under the policy of religious toleration.